

River Action campaign group launches public petition calling for urgent action from governments on river pollution crisis

- River Action issues call for a doubling of budgets to address collapsing environmental protection in England and Wales and tackle the escalating river pollution crisis.
- Campaign launch follows revelation that England’s Environment Agency had total budget in 2019/2020 of just £0.32 million to inspect over 120,000 farms, equating to just 0.65 staff in each of the country’s 14 areas.
- With every river in England now polluted beyond legal limits, the group calls on the UK and Welsh Governments ahead of COP26 to tackle the “ecological and public health crisis on our doorstep”.

3rd June 2021: Campaign group River Action today announces a new campaign to address the declining state of our rivers amidst a dramatic weakening and de-funding of the regulatory agencies tasked with protecting them. The group has launched a public petition ([link](#)) calling on the UK and Welsh Governments to double immediately the environmental protection budgets allocated to their respective regulatory agencies, the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales, in order to tackle the escalating river pollution crisis.

The petition highlights that *“agricultural pollution of rivers is rampant with farms almost never inspected, water quality rarely tested and water companies pumping raw sewage into rivers with impunity”*. Recent data shows that [every single English river is now polluted beyond legal limits](#) by human, agricultural and industrial waste. Meanwhile, in Wales, [56% of rivers fail to meet ‘good ecological status’](#) and [agricultural pollution incidents have averaged three per week](#) for the past three years.

The petition attributes much of this crisis to the complete collapse of environmental protection across England and Wales as regulatory agencies have had their funding, staffing and resources cut, noting that *“in summary, polluters can dump waste in rivers secure in the knowledge that they will be neither monitored, inspected nor prosecuted.”*

In response to a Freedom of Information request, the Environment Agency revealed that its ‘Environment and Business’ budget which covers activities including agricultural regulations, waste crime and incident response fell from £117 million in 2010/11 to £40 million in 2020/21. Welsh equivalent Natural Resources Wales has likewise suffered harsh de-funding since its 2013 creation. These cuts have impacted activities to the extent, for example, that [each farm in England can now expect just one inspection every 263 years](#). Indeed, a Freedom of Information request to the Environment Agency revealed that the 14 Area teams across England received a combined total of just £0.32 million from the overall Environment and Business Budget for agricultural enforcement in 2019/2020, equating to about 0.65 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff per Area to enforce these regulations.

Similarly, in England, [court actions against river polluters fell from 235 in 2002 to just 3 last year](#); in Wales, there were [prosecutions or civil sanctions for less than 1%](#) of pollution incidents reported from 2013-2016.

George Monbiot, River Action Advisory Board member said: *“Environmental protection is a devolved matter, but the same bleak picture emerges across both England and Wales: with environmental*

regulators dramatically weakened and defunded, and frontline staff numbers shockingly low, polluters are acting with impunity and the state of our rivers is declining drastically in front of our eyes. This is an ecological and public health crisis right on our doorstep and action is long overdue.”

In this context, River Action’s new campaign calls for immediate restoration of environmental protection budgets in both England and Wales in order to reinstate monitoring, compliance and enforcement capabilities. The group estimates the total cost per year to be in the region of £60 million¹, which it highlights is equivalent to “*the cost of a quarter of a kilometre of HS2*”.

This petition marks the launch of River Action’s second public campaign: [the group is also campaigning for action from the intensive poultry industry in the River Wye catchment](#), notably the UK’s largest egg producer Noble Foods, to take urgent action to mitigate the pollution of that river resulting from their owned intensive poultry units and supply chains.

Charles Watson, founder and chair of River Action said: *“Having watched the decline in the ecological state of iconic rivers such as the Wye with growing horror, we continue apply pressure on those companies making vast profits from polluting activities to take responsibility for their actions and clean up their acts. However, it is clear that as long as environmental regulators are not able to effectively monitor and protect our rivers, polluters will continue to dodge accountability, secure in the knowledge that they are highly unlikely ever to have to pay. Our rivers are dying. This is an urgent call to action for everyone who loves swimming in, fishing on, paddling down - or just walking alongside our rivers to get behind this campaign and demand action before it’s too late.”*

Ruth Chambers, River Action Advisory Board member said: *“While the UK seeks to demonstrate global environmental leadership by hosting the COP26 climate conference, we need to see urgent action on our own doorstep to tackle environmental crises like river pollution. People across England and Wales are demanding that their governments act now to protect rivers from being treated like sewers and rubbish dumps.”*

-ENDS-

Notes to Editor

About River Action

River Action is an environmental campaigning organisation launched in February 2021 that aims to tackle river pollution resulting from UK food supply chains by placing direct pressure on major agricultural suppliers and producers. The group has formed in response to concerning evidence that reveals the declining state of many of the UK’s rivers, including [data](#) from the Environment Agency in 2020 that showed for the first time no river in England met quality tests for pollution.

The group was founded and is chaired by Charles Watson and is guided by an Advisory Board which comprises:

¹ Please note that this figure is based on the combination of information obtained through responses to Freedom of Information requests and River Action’s interpretation of publicly disclosed information from the EA and NRW. The figure comprises an informed best estimate of the combined EA and NRW 2020/21 environmental protection budgets and will be clarified further in due course on receipt of outstanding FOI requests. This campaign calls for a doubling of these current environmental protection budgets in order to restore capacity to pre-cut levels of 8-10 years ago, when data demonstrates monitoring and enforcement activity was significantly more effective (see, for example, Salmon and Trout Conservation’s recent report [here](#)) than its current levels.

- Francesca Carnibella, Senior Associate, European Climate Foundation (strategic communications team)
- Ruth Chambers, leads the Greener UK coalition's work on the Environment Bill and new Office for Environmental Protection
- Marina Gibson, Ambassador for Angling Trust, Atlantic Salmon Trust, Fishing for Schools and Orvis Fly Fishing
- Isabella Gornall, Founder and Managing Director, Seahorse Environmental
- Dr Janina Gray, Chief Scientist, Salmon and Trout Conservation
- James Macpherson, former Deputy Chief Investment Officer at Blackrock's Active Equity business
- Nick Measham, Chief Executive, Salmon and Trout Conservation
- George Monbiot, award-winning writer and journalist
- Feargal Sharkey, environmental campaigner
- James Wallace, Chief Executive, Beaver Trust

River Action is currently in the process of registering as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

For further information and updates on River Action, please visit: www.riveractionuk.com and follow [@RiverActionUK](https://twitter.com/RiverActionUK) on Twitter.

River Action's petition can be found [here](#) and the full wording is as follows:

Double environmental protection budgets in England & Wales to fight river pollution.

River Action started this petition to The UK and Welsh Governments

River pollution is a rapidly escalating crisis. Every single English river is polluted beyond legal limits by human, agricultural and industrial waste. In Wales, where agricultural pollution is at ever-increasing levels, the majority of rivers also fail to meet 'good ecological status'.

A major cause of this crisis is the collapse of environmental protection for our rivers following years of de-funding of the UK's environmental regulatory agencies. England's Environment Agency's environmental protection funding has been cut by 75% in the last decade. In Wales, Natural Resources Wales has suffered similarly harsh de-funding since its creation in 2013. In both countries the same bleak picture emerges: agricultural pollution of rivers is rampant with farms almost never inspected; water quality is rarely tested and water companies regularly pump raw sewage into waterways with impunity. In England alone, human waste was released into rivers no less than 400,000 times last year. Prosecutions for river pollution are almost non-existent.

In summary, polluters can dump waste into our rivers secure in the knowledge that they will be neither monitored, inspected nor prosecuted.

In the year that the UK seeks to demonstrate global environmental leadership by hosting the COP26 climate conference and numerous "green" initiatives continue to be launched by governments, we must tackle the crisis on our own doorstep. The UK and Welsh Governments must restore the environmental protection budgets of their respective environment agencies so that water quality monitoring and agricultural inspections can be increased significantly and existing regulations are enforced by the routine prosecution of polluters.

The total annual cost of doubling environmental protection budgets will be in the region of £60m – the cost of the construction of less than a quarter of a kilometre of HS2.